The Sages taught: There was a stone in Jerusalem called the Claimant’s Stone - Even Ha'Toen - and anyone who lost an item would be directed there and anyone who found a lost item would be directed there.¹

The Even Ha'Toen was a kind of ancient lost and found. A place to proclaim out loud what you have lost and what you have found.

In the tractate of Ta’anit, in the Talmud within a series of stories about calamities that befell the people of Israel, including drought and plagues, we find the stories of Honi Hameagel, the circle drawer, a legendary, almost shamanic figure and rainmaker². (Taanit 19a)

There is one story about a time when there was a terrible drought, and the people went to Honi and asked him to pray for rain. Honi drew a circle on the ground, stood inside it, and prayed to God:

Have mercy on your people and answer their prayers for rain!
I will not move from this circle until it rains!

Lo and behold,
it started drizzling, and then it started raining, and

¹ Baba Metzia 28b
² Ta’anit 19a
then it was pouring until Jerusalem started flooding!

At that point, the people said to Honi, please make it stop!

Honi answered: I will not pray to make the rains stop until the waters reach the Even HaTo’en.

The Even HaTo’en, the place where loss is embraced. Where loss is said out loud. Where community gathers to recognize loss.

Honi wouldn't stop praying for rain until the waters reach the Even HaTo’en, perhaps because he understood that when there are calamities -- floods, droughts, plagues -- our capacity to face them is when we have a place and a time to come together and announce our losses.

My friend, Rabbi Chai Levy, shared with me the idea of thinking of Yizkor as our Even HaTo’en.

The place, the time where we come together to announce what we have lost.

In the midst of all these plagues, and suffering, each of us remembers loved ones: We remember parents, grandparents, spouses, siblings, children, relatives and friends.

We remember and announce our losses, of those in our community who lost someone to COVID 19.

We remember the great heroes of our country who died this year and whose work inspires us to continue to work for justice and equality: Congressman John Lewis Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

Yizkor: The place we come together to embrace loss
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We remember: George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, Daniel Prude, Elijah McClain, Ahmaud Arbery and too many more who were victims of racism and police violence against Black people this past year.

We come to the Even HaTo’en to say their names
And announce what we have lost.

And here at this Claimant’s stone, at the Even HaTo’en we cry out and announce all that we have lost in this pandemic.

200,000 Americans. Almost 1 million worldwide.

We grieve, we cry. We feel it, we feel all that we have lost in this plague.

At Yizkor, we gather to name what we have lost.
To hear each other’s cries,
To know together that we’ve lost so much
But that we are not alone.
We have each other.
We have community
We gather together in this place at this time and we remember.

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